THE MISSING TOOL
IN TRAINING

By Lori L. Silverman

How often have you taught someone a new skill, behavior or concept and sensed the person did not really learn it? It is an ongoing challenge given that people are distracted by myriad priorities.

While case studies, experiential activities, simulations, and role-plays can mitigate this challenge, using well-constructed, compelling stories at predetermined moments during training can also significantly benefit the learning process.

BENEFITS OF STORY USE

Stories captivate people's interest, making them more attentive listeners. Consequently, information communicated in this manner is more accurately recalled over time. Neurologists suggest stories may be the fundamental building block for memory since the brain prefers novelty, involvement, visuals, and an emotional jolt. Because stories engage a person's mind, heart, physical being and human spirit, they address these preferences and motivate the brain to pay attention.

Telling stories can help establish your credibility as a trainer and strengthen rapport between you and participants. Additionally, these same stories can inspire people to change–to try new behaviors, let go of old attitudes, embrace the future, and take action.

Since stories transmit meaning, they heighten both individual and organizational learning and enhance creativity and problem solving. Furthermore, they can rapidly and successfully convey complex concepts such as those found in finance, ethics and diversity. Here is a story that exemplifies these benefits.

FOR LACK OF A SYSTEM

Contributed by Larry P. English, President, INFORMATION IMPACT International, Inc.

The insurance company needed to understand its risks–exactly what it was paying for through its claims. Employees were downloading claims data so the information could be examined in this manner. As they started analyzing the medical diagnosis codes, they uncovered what appeared to be a problem. One region had a high incidence of hemorrhoid codes–so high that it was way outside the normal distribution. We wondered, "What's going on? What's causing this problem? Is there some sort of an epidemic we don't know about?"

Several of us got in touch with the regional claims supervisor. We explained that other departments were using the data, including the actuarial staff, and asked her what she knew about the situation. She exclaimed, "Oh. That's our data that we use to pay claims. I didn't know anybody else saw it. We use that particular code to identify claimants who are PITAs–you know–a 'pain in the ass.' How else are we to identify problem customers who we need to approach with special caution? If we have to get back in touch with them, this code helps us recognize that there was some sort of problem. This way we're better prepared to deal with the situation."

No matter what the problem may be, all "problems seek solutions." The challenge that comes with this is that the solution may have surprising consequences. So, whenever your problems go in search of a solution, consider whom else the solution may impact.

USING STORIES DURING TRAINING

How can you fully capitalize on the benefits of using stories during training? Here are three rules of thumb.

1. Ensure the story fits the specific training objective(s) and is appropriate to the audience. This does not require the story to be a "literal" fit to the topic or the participants' background; a metaphorical or symbolic story can be just as powerful. The stories you tell may be your own, an organizational legend, or from an outside source.

2. Structure the story in a compelling manner. First, paint the context. Introduce the cast of characters, describe pertinent elements such as the location, time of year, weather, geography, and explain the situation. Next, outline the issue, obstacle, or problem and build to a climax. Finally, describe how the situation is resolved and move listeners to meaning by answering the question "what's the point?" (problems seek solutions) and stating the "call to action" (So, whenever your problems go in search of a solution, consider whom else the solution may impact.).

3. Determine when to tell the story within the training design. Use them to:

- Introduce or wrap-up a training module.

- Reinforce a concept, idea, or key point.

- Answer a participant question.

- Elaborate on how to use a skill, theory or model.

- Showcase appropriate or inappropriate behavior.

Stay away from painful or embarrassing stories or those that speak to life-and-death challenges until you have established rapport and credibility.

GET STARTED

Stories abound everywhere. Keep track of them so they are easily accessible. Adding stories to your training in a planned manner will capture participants' attention, enhance your relationships with them, and strengthen their learning.

"For Lack of a System" reproduced from Stories Trainers Tell by Mary B. Wacker and Lori L. Silverman with permission of the publisher. Copyright © 2003 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published by Pfeiffer, a Wiley Imprint, pg. 288.

Lori L. Silverman is the owner of Partners for Progress, a management consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations think and act differently so they can achieve higher levels of performance. She is the co-author of *Critical SHIFT: The Future of Quality in Organizational Performance* and *Stories Trainers Tell.* Her new book is *Wake Me Up When the Data is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results.*

Lori can be reached by e-mail at lori@partnersforprogress.com. For additional free articles, check out www.partnersforprogress.com.